

March 21, 2000: "The State of Democracy and Human Rights in Turkmenistan."

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Commission,

My name is Firuz Kazemzadeh. I am professor emeritus of history at Yale University and a member of the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom which has endorsed the statement I am about to make.

Turkmenistan is one of the most repressive of the successor states of the Soviet Union and one of the poorest. Yet Turkmenistan is rich in natural resources. Its known reserves of natural gas place it fourth in the world, behind Russia, the United States, and Iran. Turkmenistan has an estimated six to eight billion-ton oil reserve, but geography and politics have made it difficult for foreign business to invest there.

Bordering on the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, Turkmenistan occupies an important strategic position. That very position, however, makes it vulnerable.

With a population of fewer than five million and a limited pool of educated persons, Turkmenistan has been unable to make much economic or social progress since it achieved independence in 1991. Its government practices and attitudes have remained largely Soviet in substance and style.

Turkmenistan has never been a nation. The nomadic tribes that inhabit the area east of the Caspian never had a central government. Conquered by Russia in the last decades of the nineteenth century, they were ruled from St. Petersburg and Moscow until 1991. Thus there is no

tradition of government, no legal tradition, except what has been inherited from an alien colonial power. It is, therefore, not surprising that Turkmenistan today is ruled by a president whose authority in practice is not limited by laws. As under the Soviets, in Turkmenistan today elections and referenda are nothing but public endorsements of the decrees of the ruler.

My concern is with human rights, and primarily with religious freedom that does not exist in Turkmenistan. The government lives in fear. It is frightened of events that have overtaken Afghanistan, where the Taliban have engaged in a bloody conflict and imposed their version of Islamic theocracy on the country. It is frightened of what has transpired in Tajikistan and by the possibility that Turkmenistan might be infiltrated by Islamicist political or military groups, particularly the Wahhabis, presumed to be financed by Saudi Arabia, groups that would receive aid from abroad. Fear of intervention and subversion prompts the government endlessly to emphasize Turkmenistan's neutrality, which is proclaimed to be one of the foundational principles of Turkmenistan's statehood.

The government sees any religious organization as a potential threat to the stability of the state. It should be noted that the Turkmen Muslim population in its vast majority is tolerant and shows no signs of wishing to establish a theocratic state on the Afghan or Iranian model. The repressive policies of the government in regard to religion are motivated not so much by religious intolerance as by fear of diversity, fear of losing control.

The collapse of Communism has left an ideological and psychological vacuum in Turkmenistan that the governing establishment, itself a child of the Soviet regime, is trying to fill through the cultivation of an artificial nationalism and the cult of the leader. The president is being turned into a superhuman being, perhaps even a prophet. Rumors circulate in Ashgabat that a book entitled *Ruhnameh*, a Perso-Arabic word literally meaning "soul book," is already in draft. This book would take its place next to the Koran as a repository of truth about morality and a prescription for the conduct of life of the Turkmen people.

There is no room for independent thought and free religion. While the Constitution speaks of freedom of religion in terms that echo the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, supplementary legislation and government practice make a mockery of principles so proclaimed. All religions and denominations, except for Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy, have been virtually banned. The 1997 law that requires a religious community to have at least 500 members to be registered makes all activity by smaller communities illegal. Thus Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is have been in effect outlawed. Some of their adherents have been subjected to arrest, intimidation, and deportation. Their houses of worship have been closed or demolished.

The Baptists, who have met the numerical requirement for registration, have nevertheless been refused recognition. Pastor Vladimir Chernov was deported in December 1999. Baptist leaders Anatolii Belyaev and Mikhail Kozlov were arrested by officers of the KNB (National Security Committee) in February 2000. Belyaev, his wife, and his daughter were eventually deported to Russia. During a raid on the Ashgabat Baptist church, a KNB officer is reported to have said, "First we will deport all foreign missionaries, then we'll strangle the remaining Christians in this country."

The Turkmen Baptist Shageldy Atakov was arrested in his home at Turkmenbashi (former Krasnovodsk) in December 1998 and sentenced to four years imprisonment for his involvement in the activities of local Baptists. His wife and five children have been subjected to "internal deportation" on KNB orders as she refused to sign a statement renouncing her Baptist faith. Other members of the Atakov family have been subjected to arrest and harassment.

The demolition of the Seventh-day-Adventist church in Ashgabat, erected with government permission; the destruction of the unfinished Hare Krishna temple in Mary; the refusal to register the Bible Society of Turkmenistan; raids on the homes of members of unregistered religious communities; confiscation of religious literature, and the ever present threat of arrest and imprisonment, have created an atmosphere in which all practice of religion is dangerous.

While high government officials have been promising for months that the situation would improve and the numerical requirement for registration of religious groups lowered, no improvement has taken place, and harassment by the police and the KNB (Committee for National Security) has continued or even increased.

America's commitment to support international religious freedom requires action on the part of the United States government. It should continuously remind the government of Turkmenistan that maltreatment of religious minorities would have serious consequences for relations between the two countries. However, given the facts of political life in Turkmenistan, only representations made on the highest level would be heard in Ashgabat.

The United States should raise the issue at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and advocate the appointment of a special rapporteur who would investigate the situation in Turkmenistan. A resolution condemning human rights violations there is bound to influence in some degree the thinking of the regime.

Perhaps the most effective measures would be economic ones. Turkmenistan's economy has been deteriorating. It can be repaired and developed only with large infusions of capital and technology from outside the country. Turkmenistan is currently engaged in intricate negotiations with several countries about the construction of pipelines to convey its natural gas to world markets. This provides leverage that the United States and other like-minded countries could very well use in urging the government of Turkmenistan to improve its behavior in regard to human rights, and specifically in regard to religious freedom.

Rapid and radical improvement of Turkmenistan's treatment of religious minorities cannot be expected. Still, consistent use of all legitimate means to push the government of Turkmenistan in the right direction must sooner or later achieve the desired results.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.